

Motherland, Patrick Centre Birmingham

Ballet Dance Magazine, 1 November 2012, David Mead

Charlotte Vincent's new "Motherland" is a challenging, multi-layered and often thought-provoking journey through motherhood, women's choices and image. Much of the time that journey is messy. A recurring scene sees Aurora Lubos walk on in an elegant black evening dress and high heels, red wine bottle in hand. But instead of drinking it, she splashes red blood-like liquid against the white back wall, hitches up her dress and, staring straight at us, sits right over the stain. After a few seconds, Andrea Catania walks on and collapses in a pile of earth, closely followed by Patrycja Kujawska playing a soulful tune on a violin. Explanation is not required. And what is Vincent's view of men? She has them walk on, smile at us, drink from the bottle and walk off.

Don't think for a minute, though, that Vincent's journey is all dark and depressing; far from it. Yes, she returns to this scene time and again, and there's plenty more, not least when Lubos screams as one of the men stuffs blood-stained cotton wool up her dress as cymbals crash. In between, though, there are plenty of beautiful, poignant and amusing moments as she presents her view of the relationship between men and women, and in doing so, how women see themselves. Among the best and most hypnotic of these is a scene featuring one of the women singing gently as she dances along the back wall. Those slower, reflective moments are important. They give you time to think.

Structurally, "Motherland" is very much like a Pina Bausch piece. Pictures, moments and incidents come and go. There are a lot of them. On the whole they are powerful and link together well. There are times, though, when meaning and connection is lost and the work dips significantly. As potent as it is, some judicious pruning would not come amiss.

The association of fertility with the earth is a recurring theme. Several times Lubos appears with her dress hitched up, the folds containing soil that is emptied onto the stage. Early on, that soil is the setting for Greig Cooke and Catania to have sex, watched by the others, to the

sounds of Scott Smith on guitar and singing a song that includes the line “Sowing the seeds of joy”.

“Motherland” might be about women, but of course the men are integral to everything. In most scenes they use the women and then casually discard them. Only rarely are there any signs of tenderness. Men it seems need sex for its own sake rather than as part of any deeper relationship. One scene towards the end depicts them as snakes slithering for cover. Earlier, Cooke unzips his trousers and pulls out a banana, which he then gobbles. Soon after, Robert Clark traps his private in a box lid. In pain, he pulls out a blackened banana. He loses his appetite. The point is made strongly but, as with the rest of the piece, it doesn’t so much present men as a particular view of men; and what a generally depressing and rather predictable view it is.

Linking everything together is 12 year-old Leah Yeager. She has a remarkable presence for one so young. Time and again she walks into scenes, stands and watches. Looking at the others, she asks, “Why are you doing that?” All too often it’s an incredibly pertinent question. But even when silent her body speaks volumes. Her innocence is in stark contrast to everything else that happens. But there are glimpses of a possible future too. Referencing a gesture seen so often in Bausch’s work, she plays with her hair in her fingers, seducing us as she does so. Occasionally she mimics the older women, posing and taking pictures of herself on her smartphone. Does cultural conditioning and society make it nigh on impossible to escape what we see from the others? Discuss. Yeager also features in a duet with one of the men. For once, man is depicted as caring, but in the aftermath of the Jimmy Saville revelations, and the nature and themes of the rest of the piece, was I the only one who found it disturbing?

A more mature and very dignified perspective comes from 75 year-old Benita Oakley. She tells of her first pregnancy in 1956 and the problems she faced as an unmarried mother, notably how she was separated from her child by hospital staff immediately after the birth. Later, apparently remembering what it was like to be beautiful, she puts on lipstick and combs her hair before reliving the stories of her second and third births in 1957 (now

married but men not allowed to be part of the delivery) and 1977 (her husband there but soon lost interest and died). In essence it's the same story. Nothing it seems is new.

It ends as it begins. The dancers walk on, men and women separately, stand and stare at the audience. Nothing is resolved, nothing has changed, except in our minds, now full of questions and thoughts.